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Viewing cable 07SANSALVADOR1943, POTENTIAL THIRD FORCE IN THE SALVADORAN ELECTORAL

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07SANSALVADOR1943	2007-09-27 22:22	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Salvador

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.wikileaks.elfaro.net/es/201106/notas/4565/>

VZCZCXYZ0013
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSN #1943/01 270222Z
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 272222Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7985
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001943

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: POTENTIAL THIRD FORCE IN THE SALVADORAN ELECTORAL
LANDSCAPE

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY:

1. (U) Former ARENA party Economy Minister Arturo Zablah is heading up a center-left alliance which may serve as a launching pad for a run at El Salvador's presidency in 2009. Following nearly a year of meetings and alliance building with politicians, academics and civil society representatives, Zablah unveiled his plan of government this month. In it, he identifies what he sees as the failures of nearly two decades of successive ARENA administrations and his plan of action to address these failures. Zablah hopes to capture the support of centrist voters that are increasingly unhappy with the polarization of the country's political arena and not strongly attracted to either ARENA or the FMLN. Zablah, a businessman and seasoned politician, is clearly interested in a role either as a presidential candidate or a power broker. He has yet to formalize a relationship with an existing political party, but he seems to feel that his movement can build sufficient momentum to bring a party possibly the FDR, to him. Though it is early in the political season, a Zablah run -- even an unsuccessful one -- could significantly impact the country's political landscape.

A New Alliance

2. (U) Arturo Zablah, the patriarch of a powerful Salvadoran business clan, is heading a broad-based effort to create what he claims is a centrist alternative to El Salvador's existing political parties. Zablah, the former Minister of the Economy under the ARENA Presidency of Armando Calderon Sol, is the driving force behind the "Alliance for Change," a center-left political movement that is attempting to rally civil society and the professional class behind an effort to transform the Salvadoran political landscape.

3. (U) Zablah's political platform, "Towards Sustainable Development in El Salvador," is effectively a plan of government. This tract, a widely-circulated pamphlet that the group debuted at a rally in September attended by nearly 2,000 people, identifies seven principal problems facing El Salvador, ranging from delinquency and organized crime to corruption, impunity, political polarization, unemployment, fiscal irresponsibility, and environmental damage. In response to these problems, he offers a range of social, political and economic strategies. These include the creation of an independent electoral authority; proposals to eliminate government and police corruption; a stronger focus on health, education and housing issues; pension reform; a larger government role in promoting small business and microenterprise; tax reform including removing the value added tax on food and medicine; and an analysis of the impact of the 2001 dollarization of the economy.

Zablah on Zablah

14. (C) On September 18, Political Counselor and Deputy met with Zablah and his public relations spokesman, Carlos Vega. Zablah opened the meeting with a summary of the main tenants of his political program. He argued that the FMLN is inherently unable to reform and has painted itself into a corner by preaching an ideology that it now cannot distance itself from. He opined that that the FMLN cannot win this election alone, and that any electoral chance it has lies in coalition with someone else. Zablah commented that the FMLN faces an insurmountable hurdle in that the Salvadoran lower class is inherently conservative and genuinely fears the sort of radical change that the FMLN has been threatening for years. He also concluded that the average Salvadoran values the strong bilateral relationship with the U.S., and fears that if the FMLN gains power, the relationship would deteriorate to the detriment of Salvadorans living in the U.S. (Note: Though he didn't directly say it, it was clear that he meant an FMLN victory would mark the end of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans. End note.)

15. (C) The conversation also included some interesting comments on public security. Zablah noted that immigration to the U.S., resulting disir

The Numbers May Not Lie

16. (C) Zablah has obviously given serious thought to electoral dynamics. He summed up El Salvador's electoral arithmetic as follows: Of some 3.8 million potential voters, 800,000 will not vote; a million represent the hard-core supporters of ARENA and the FMLN, leaving roughly two million votes in play. Zablah stated that he is confident he could get enough of those votes to become the third force in the electoral calculus. He argues that if a second round of balloting is Zablah vs. ARENA, the FMLN will desperately support him in order to keep ARENA out of power. If the tables are turned, ARENA does the same. Either way, he plays a role.

17. (U) Zablah may not be far off the mark. Early polling data suggests that ARENA is vulnerable on economic issues, crime, and corruption. An August 2007 poll conducted by La Prensa Grafica, one of the country's two major daily newspapers, showed ARENA support at the Presidential level at only 27%, and the FMLN with not quite 17%, leaving a majority of the population undecided as to whether or not to vote and for whom. Though the election is over a year away, and the parties have yet to select their standard bearers, the data suggests that much of the center is indeed up for grabs.

18. (C) In a separate meeting between Emboffs and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), a center-left FMLN splinter group, Faction Chief Julio Hernandez stated that his party is actively considering offering the Presidential spot on its ticket to Zablah. It remains to be seen if the offer will actually be made or accepted.

Comment

19. (C) Zablah comes across as organized, well-informed, confident, and genuine. Though encouraged by the progress he has made thus far in terms of resonating with the public and putting his movement on the political map, he is still in the exploratory stages of putting together a formal candidacy, let alone a political party. He noted that if he has not built serious momentum in the next few months, and if it looks as though success is not in the cards, he will likely cut his losses and quit. In the meantime, the movement is focusing on building support and recognition with professional groups and academics while considering the possibility of joining up with an existing party such as the FDR to avoid the hassles and hurdles of forming a new party.

110. (C) Zablah seems sincere when he claims that his principal aim is incorporating civil society and the professional classes into the Salvadoran political spectrum. In so doing, he hopes to open up additional political space and force both ARENA and the FMLN to be more accountable to the Salvadoran electorate. By all appearances, Zablah has so far gone over well with civil society, the universities, and, perhaps most importantly, the press. If his "brand" matures and he perseveres into the electoral cycle, Zablah could become a sought-after alliance partner and/or deal broker.
Glazer